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ABSTRACT

It has been generally understood that Japanese has two grammatical tenses, past and non-past. However, there are statements about future events which use the "past tense." Furthermore, for certain verbs, the "past tense" is not confined to describing strictly a past event. This paper seeks to clarify the meaning of tense in Japanese and to show the relationship between grammatical tense in a sentence and the extra-linguistic time of events by introducing the notion of focus. Tense is examined in main and dependent clauses. (Author)

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Time Focus within the Japanese Tense System[1]

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It has been generally understood that Japanese has two grammatical tenses, past and non-past. However, there are statements about future events which use the 'past tense'. Furthermore, for certain verbs, the 'past tense' is not confined to describing strictly a past event. This paper will clarify the meaning of tense in Japanese and will show the relationship between grammatical tense in a sentence and the extra-linguistic time of events by introducing the notion of focus. Tense will be examined in main and dependent clauses.

1. INTRODUCTION. It has been generally accepted by linguists that Japanese has two grammatical tenses (or aspects); the past and the non-past (tenses), or the completive and the non-completive (aspects), or whatever else they may be called, e.g.,

(1) zyoũga kita 'John came.'

(2) zyoũga kuru 'John will come/comes.'

However, there are statements about future events which use the 'past tense', e.g.,

(3) paateiwa asita datta?[2] 'Was [it that] the party [is] tomorrow?'

which actually means 'The party will be tomorrow, won't it?' Furthermore, for certain verbs, the 'past tense' is not confined to describing strictly a past event, e.g.,

(4) tukueno ueni hoũga atta 'There was a book on the desk.'

does not exclude 'There was [and still is] a book on the desk.'

In addition, in certain complex sentences, the 'non-past tense' is used to describe a past event and the 'past tense' is used to refer to a future event,

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e.g.,

(5) amega huru maeni utie kaeqta '[I] returned home before it "rains"(=rained).'

(6) karega kaeqta atode kimeyoo 'Let's decide after he "left"(=leaves).'

Sentence (5) does not specify whether the raining was in the past or in the future.

This paper will redefine 'tense' in Japanese and will show the relationship between grammatical tense in a sentence and the extra-linguistic time of events by introducing the notion of 'focus'.[3]

2. HOW HAVE THE 'TENSES' OF JAPANESE BEEN INTERPRETED? First of all, we shall consider how 'tense' is usually defined. Lyons (1968; pp. 304-5) says:

> The category of tense has to do with time-relations in so far as these are expressed by systematic grammatical contrasts...The essential characteristic of the category of tense is that it relates the time of the action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance.

In Japanese, there are two grammatical forms which express the time-relation and which contrast to each other. Consider the following pairs:

(7) a. terebio mimasu '[I] will watch TV.'

b. terebio mimasita '[I] watched TV.'

(8) a. asokoni gakuseiga iru 'There are students over there.'

b. asokoni gakuseiga ita 'There were students over there.'

(9) a. ano eigawa omosiroi 'That movie is interesting.'

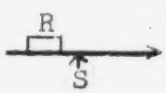
b. ano eigawa omosirokaqta 'That movie was interesting.'

This contrast has been called non-past and past; present and past; or imperfect and perfect. Martin, for instance, says in (1954; p. 73) about Japanese tenses:

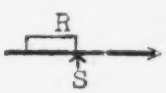
> The imperfect mood [sometimes called the 'present tense'] indicates that an action has not been completed--it may or may not have begun, but it must be definite, decided action...the perfect mood [sometimes called the 'past tense'] shows that the action has been completed.[4]

For a simple sentence, 'not completed' means that a certain action has not been completed before the sentence is uttered; that is, the action was not in the past when it was described. On the other hand, 'completed' means that a certain action has been completed before the sentence is uttered; that is, the action was in the past when it was described.

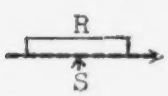
This relationship between the time of an event and the time when the speaker describes it may be illustrated as follows (here R stands for the real, extra-linguistic time of event, while S stands for the speaking time):[5]

(10) a. 

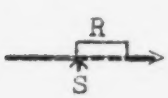
tegamio kaita '[I] wrote a letter.'

b. 

tegamio kaita

c. 

tegamio kaku '[I] am writing a letter.'

d. 

tegamio kaku

e.

tegamio kaku

3. FOCUS IN THE TENSE. The above diagrams are sufficient to illustrate the difference between sentences (1) and (2) or sentences (7a) and (7b), but it is not always true in cases such as (8b) and (9b). That is, there are some peculiarities which cannot be illustrated by the above diagrams. First of all, in the case of verbs expressing a state of being such as sentences (4) and (8b) above, the 'past tense' does not necessarily mean that the state existed only in the past but rather that the state may still be continuing into the present or perhaps into the future

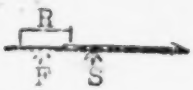
as well. Note the following sentences:

(11) a. aq sokoni aru 'Oh! there it is.'

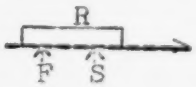
b. aq sokoni aqta 'Oh! there it was [all the time].'

There is no difference between at least the denotative meanings of sentences (11a) and (11b). Both sentences can be used when someone has found something he has been looking for. Whether the speaker uses sentence (11a) or (11b) depends on his focus of attention. That is, he may use (11a), if he focuses upon the fact that this is where it is, while (11b) may be used when he wants to focus upon the fact that this is where it was while he was looking for it. The 'past tense' as expressed in (11b) has been variously called the 'past tense of discovery' (Suzuki: 1965; p. 27) or the 'psychological past' (Mikami: 1953; pp. 224-5).

What is important here in order to explain the distinction is to note the time 'focus' of the speaker; this 'focus' is defined here as the point along the extra-linguistic time line upon which the speaker places his attention. In the following illustration F stands for this focal point of the speaker's attention:

(12) a. 

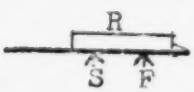
kinoo hoũga aqta 'There was a book yesterday.'

b. 

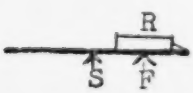
kinoo hoũga aqta

c.

ima hoũga aru 'There is a book now.'

d. 

asita hoũga aru 'There will be a book tomorrow.'

e. 

asita hoũga aru

To use this notion of 'focus' to discuss grammatical tense or time-relations parallels the obvious psychological fact that whenever we speak about an event or state, we focus on and describe only a certain time-

related portion of that event or state. For instance, if we have done something both yesterday and the day before yesterday, we may want to talk about the happening on just one of the two days; then we would not normally also mention the fact that it also happened on the other day unless our focus was on the repetition. For example, suppose the total sentence is:

(13) I saw Mary the day before yesterday and again yesterday.

If the focus is on the event which occurred yesterday, we would simply say:

(14) I saw Mary yesterday.

Sentence (14), however, does not guarantee that I either did or did not see her on any previous day(s).

The significance of the notion of focus is endorsed by negative sentences. Observe the following sentences:

(15) a. zyoũwa konakaqta 'John didn't come.'

b. zyoũwa mada konai 'John "doesn't" (=hasn't) come yest.'

c. zyoũwa konai 'John "doesn't(=hasn't and won't) come.'

Suppose the situation is that John has not come yet. When the speaker simply focuses his attention on some period in the past, he uses (15a). When the speaker supposes that John will yet come, he uses (15b). When he thinks that John, who has not come yet, is not going to come, he uses (15c). The main difference among the above three sentences is that of the location of the focus of the speaker's attention along the extra-linguistic time line.

Consequently, we propose the following terms to account for the Japanese tenses: 1) the completive tense indicates that the speaker's focus is on an event or state which precedes the speaking time; and 2) the non-completive tense indicates that the speaker's focus is on an event or on that portion of an event which coincides with or follows the speaking time.

This system of tenses--completive and non-completive--should not be confused with the system of aspect. Hockett (1958; p. 237) says:

> Aspects have to do with the location of an event in time, but with its temporal distribution or contour.

In other words, using our notion of 'focus', the aspect system concerns itself with such relations as whether the 'focus' precedes, coincides with, or follows the event. On the other hand, the Japanese tense system defined here concerns itself not with the relationship between the 'focus' and the real time of event but rather with the relative ordering of the 'focus' and the speaking time; i.e., whether the focus precedes, coincides with, or follows the speaking time.[7]

Certain tense phenomena in Japanese seem to be peculiar; we shall attempt to show that they are not peculiarities at all when considered from the view point of the 'focus' of the Japanese tenses.

4. COMPLETIVE TENSE IN OBJECTIVE SENTENCES. Let us first consider sentences which have the completive tense and which refer to a future event as in the sentences in (16):

(16) a. asita zyoũga utie kuruũdaqta 'It was that John will come to my house tomorrow.'

b. asitawa kaigiga aruũdaqta 'It was that there will be a conference tomorrow.'

c. ano hitono utiwa daigakuno tikakudaqta 'It was that her house is near the university.'

Sentences like (16a), (16b) and (16c) may be used to confirm the information about present or future events, which has already been understood by the speaker. In (16a) and (16b) the morpheme ũ in the verb appears to allow these sentences to be used to describe future events. Compare the sentences in each of the following sets:

(17) a. (asita) iku

b. (kinoo) iqta

c. (asita) ikuũda

d. (asita) ikuũdaqta

e. (kinoo) iqtaũda

f. (kinoo) iqtaũdaqta

(18) a. paateiwa asitada

b. paateiwa kinoodaqta

c. paateiwa asitanaũda

d. paateiwa asitadaqta

e. paateiwa kinoodaqtaũda

f. paateiwa kinoodaqtaũda

In sentences in (17) and (18) the time relations of each sentence are as follows:

a) future event
b) past event
c) future event
d) past report of future event
e) past event
f) recalling of past event

Items (a) and (c) contrast with each other as do (b) and (e). This kind of contrast has been only very vaguely explained; native speakers are generally unable to explain the distinction in meaning between (a) and (b) on the one hand and (c) and (e) on the other, even though they know that there is a distinction.

However, judging from the fact that (f) has two completive tenses and that (d) and (e) are distinct from each other in meaning, we believe that there must be two clauses in the respective deep structures of (c) through (f). Furthermore, it is proper to consider that the completive tense under discussion in this section (that is, the completive tense forms which appear in the sentences indicating a future event) does not belong to the clause which indicates the future event but rather to the other clause. Consequently, (17d) has a meaning like 'It was decided that I would go tomorrow.' We shall call this kind of sentence an 'objective' sentence, since it refers to information from a source external to the speaker. In such objective sentences as (16a), (16b), (16c) and (17d), the focus is on the time of the reporting, the objective factor, and not on the future event. Most Japanese verbs behave like those in the sentences in (17). In sentences in (18), (b) and (d) on the one hand and (e) and (f) on the other have identical inflections, respectively. This can be explained because the duplicated forms are avoided; for instance, *kinoodaqtaũdaqta never appears in any surface struc-

ture. However, it is believed that the deep structures of the sentences in (18) are the same as those for the sentences in (17).

5. THE TENSE SYSTEM IN DEPENDENT CLAUSES. We have so far discussed tenses in the main clause of the sentence. We shall consider tenses in the dependent clauses below. First, in the case of adverbial clauses, the semantic relationship of the tenses across boundries is indicated by the semantic characteristics of the connector. In other words, the adverbial connector itself indicates the sequence of the actions or states expressed in the dependent clause and the main clause. Consider sentences in (19) through (22):

(19) a. kuukooe iqtekara daigakue iqta 'After [I] "going"(=went) to the airport, [I] went to the university.'

b. kuukooe iqtekara daigakue iku 'After [I] "going"(=go) to the airport, [I] will go to the university.'

(20) a. kuukooe iqta atode daigakue iqta 'After [I] went to the airport, [I] went to the university.'

b. kuukooe iqta atode daigakue iku 'After [I] "went"(=go) to the airport, [I] will go to the university.'

(21) a. kuukooe iku maeni daigakue iqta 'Before [I] "go"(=went) to the airport, [I] went to the university.'

b. kuukooe iku maeni daigakue iku 'Before [I] go to the airport, [I] will go to the university.'

(22) a. terebio minagara beũkyoosita 'While watching TV, [I] studied.'

b. terebio minagara beũkyoosuru "While watching TV, [I] will study.'

When the order of two actions, one in the main clause, and the other in the adverbial clause, is obvious from the connectors such as kara, 'after', atode 'after', maeni 'before', nagara 'while', and aida 'while', the tense is neutralized. That is, in the clause ending

with kara$_1$, no tense is indicated in the verb (-te has no indication to tense). The non-completive tense cannot appear in a clause ending with atode; the completive tense is not possible in a clause ending with maeni, nagara, or aida. It is not necessary for the verb in such clauses to indicate the 'focus', because the respective connectors sufficiently indicate the time focus in the adverbial clause and the relationship of this focus to that of the main clause.

The same focus involvement is seen in conditional adverbial clauses such as sentences in (23); that is to be expected because a conditional adverbial clause has no specific influence upon the action in the main clause but rather is only a prior condition for the action.

(23) a. karega ikeba iqta 'If he "going"(=had gone), [I] "went"(=would have gone).'

b. karega ikeba iku 'If he "going"(=goes), [I] will go.'

Within an adverbial clause ending with toki 'when', the verb ending indicates the focus within the toki clause. Then the toki clause itself indicates the focus of the action of the main clause. Within the toki clause, one of two tenses appears. If the focus of the toki clause precedes the time focus of the main clause, the verb in the toki clause verbal time focus coincides with or follows the focus of the verb of the main clause, the non-completive tense occurs within the toki clause, e.g.,

(24) a. karega kitatoki hoũo yoũdeita 'When he came, [I] was reading a book.'

b. karega kitatoki hoũo yoũdeiru 'When he "came"(=comes), [I] will be reading a book.'

c. karewa kaerutoki sayonarato iqta 'When he "leaves"(=left), he said good-bye.'

d. karewa kaerutoki sayonarato iu 'When he leaves, he says good-bye.'

In the case of such connectors as node 'because' and kara$_2$ 'because', two actions, one in the adverbial clause and the other in the main clause, are independent from each other in terms of time focus, e.g.,

(25) a. kuukooe iqtanode daigakue iqta 'Because [I] went to the airport, [I] went to the university.'

b. kuukooe iqtanode daigakue iku 'Because [I] went to the airport, [I] will go to the university.'

c. kuukooe ikunode daigakue iqta 'Because [I] will go to the airport, [I] went to the university.'

d. kuukooe ikunode daigakue iku 'Because [I] will go to the airport, [I] will go to the university.'

Next, we shall consider the somewhat more complicated tense phenomena of noun-modifying (relative) clauses. Observe the following sentences:

(26) a. kaqta hoõo yoũda
1) '[I] read the book which [I] had bought.'
2) '[I] read the book which [I] bought [later].'

b. kaqta hoõo yomu
1) '[I] will read the book which [I] will have bought.'
2) '[I] will read the book which [I] bought.'

c. kau hoõo yoũda
1) '[I] read the book which [I] bought [later].'
2) '[I] read the book which [I] will buy.'

d. kau hoõo yomu
1) '[I] will read the book which [I] will buy [later].'
2) '[I] will read the book which [I] will have bought.'

An interesting phenomenon here is that each sentence in (26) has two different interpretations.[8] We shall consider why two interpretations are possible for each sentence containing a noun-modifying clauses. Examples in (26) show that the use of tenses in the main clause is consistently the same as that for a simple sentence. We can explain this use in terms of the

relative ordering of the speaker's focus and the speaking time. Therefore, the two interpretations of each sentence must be attributed to the tenses in the noun-modifying clauses.

The use of tenses in the noun-modifying clause can be classified into two kinds. First, the tense is used in the same manner as that of the toki clause discussed above; i.e., if the time focus in the noun-modifying clause precedes the time focus in the main clause, the verb in the noun-modifying clause is in the completive tense. Therefore, interpretations (a.1) and (b.1) are possible because of the completive tense in the noun-modifying clause. If the focus of the noun-modifying clause coincides with or follows the focus of the verb in the main clause, the non-completive tense occurs within the noun-modifying clause. Interpretations (c.1) and (d.1) are therefore possible because of the non-completive tense in the noun-modifying clause.

In the second use, it is also possible for the tense in the noun-modifying clause to be independent of that in the main clause. That is, any ordering of the focuses in the noun-modifying clause and in the main clause may not be reflected in the tense of the noun-modifying clause; but instead, the tense of the noun-modifying clause may simply indicate the relative ordering of the time focus of the noun-modifying clause and the speaking time. Therefore, it is possible to have both the interpretations given in (a.2) and (b.2)--occurring with the completive tense in the noun-modifying clause--and the interpretations given in (c.2) and (d.2)--occurring with the non-completive tense.

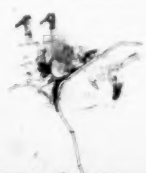
On the other hand, note that the two Japanese sentences in (27) may have the same English meaning because of the two (overlapping) use of the tense involved.

(27) a. hoõo yoõdeita otokoni kiita '[I] asked a man who was reading a book.'

b. hoõo yoõdeiru otokoni kiita '[I] asked a man who "is"(=was) reading a book.'

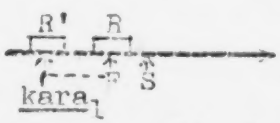
We believe that the differences in the use of tense in noun-modifying clauses are derived from the differences in either the semantic structure or the grammatical deep structure.

To summarize the discussion in this section, we shall present diagrams of the tense system of complex sentences. The tenses in dependent clause can be



classified into three types.

First of all, when the temporal ordering of the action in the main clause and that in the dependent clause is obvious from the connector or if this ordering is irrelevant, the tense in the dependent clause is neutralized--either only one tense appears or no tense appears in the dependent clause. With karaɪ 'after', for instance, this system is illustrated as follows, with R' standing for the real, extra-linguistic time of the event in the dependent clause:

(28) a. 

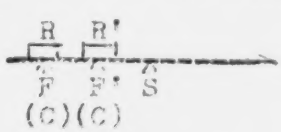
kuukooe iqtekara daigakue iqta 'After [I] went to the airport, [I] went to the univ.'

b.

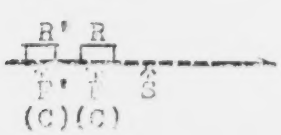
kuukooe iqtekara daigakue iku 'After [I] go to the airport, [I] will go to the univ.'

Of course, R' may follow R (if the connector is maeni 'before', etc.), coincide with R (if it is nagara 'while', etc.), or occupy no position on the time line (if it is tara 'if', etc.).

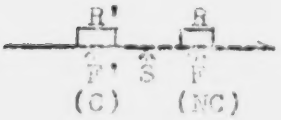
The second case occurs when the tense system in a dependent clause of the second type is independent of that of the main clause. This is illustrated as follows, with F' standing for the focus on the action in the dependent clause, C standing for the completive tense, and NC for the non-completive tense:

(29) a. 

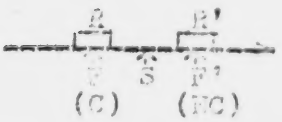
kaqta hoũo yoũda '[I] read the book which [I] bought.'

b. 

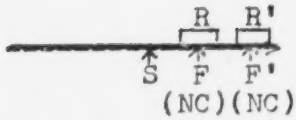
(same as above)

c. 

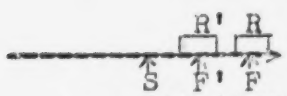
kaqta hoũo yomu '[I] will read the book which [I] bought.'

d. 

kau hoũo yoũda '[I] read the book which [I] will buy.'

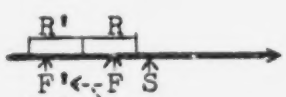
e. 

kau hoũo yomu '[I] will read the book which [I] will buy.'

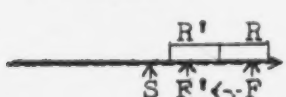
f. 

(same as above)

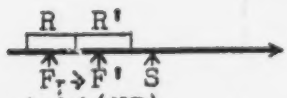
The third case occurs when a certain type of dependent clause (the one with the connector toki 'when' and the noun-modifying clause of the first type) itself indicates the focus of the action of the main clause. This does not always mean that the focus of the action of the dependent clause (F') is simultaneous with that of the main clause (F) but it may mean that they are in sequence. In this case the tense of the dependent clause simply indicates the sequential order of F and F'. This is illustrated as follows:

(30) a. 

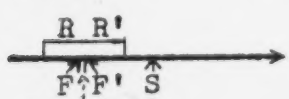
karega kitatoki hanasita 'When he came, [I] talked.'

b. 

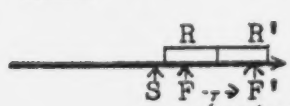
karega kitatoki hanasu 'When he comes, [I] will talk.'

c. 

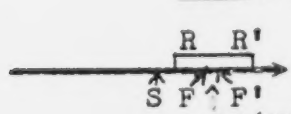
karewa kaerutoki sayonarato iqta 'When he left, he said goodbye.'

d. 

(same as above)

e. 

karewa kaerutoko sayonarato iu 'When he leaves, he says goodbye.'

f. 

(same as above)

There should not be any confusion as to which one of the above three cases a given dependent clause belongs to, because either the connector or the construction of the dependent clause, or sometimes situations, will make this clear.

6. CONCLUSION. For a complete discussion of the entire system of Japanese tense, we should also go on to consider the aspect system, and especially, the behavior of the morpheme _ir_. This has not been possible within the limit of this paper. However, this paper has shown that Japanese tenses always consistently indicate one kind of time relationship. That is to say, the completive tense indicates that the speaker's focus (_F_ or _F'_) precedes the speaking time (S), or that his focus on an action in the dependent clause (_F'_) precedes his focus on an action in the main clause (_F_). The non-completive tense indicates that the speaker's focus (_F_ or _F'_) coincides with or follows the speaking time (S), or that his focus on an action in the dependent clause (_F'_) coincides with or follows his focus on an action in the main clause (_F_). This means that unlike the English tense system, which is 'time-oriented' (i.e., it is directly related to the real time of an event in terms of the extra-linguistic time), the Japanese tense system is only 'time-related' (i.e., it indicates only the sequential ordering of two actions or states).

NOTES

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented on March 11, 1972, to the 17th Annual Conference on Linguistics of the International Linguistic Association held in New York City. I wish to thank Professor Robert L. Allen of Columbia University for his useful comments on the earlier version of this paper; to him I owe the terms 'time-oriented' and 'time-related' which I have adopted. One of my colleagues at the University of Hawaii, Professor Harvey Taylor, has also given many useful suggestions.

[2]The question mark here shows that this utterance has a rising intonation contour.

[3]Focus as used here does not indicate the 'grammatical focus' used in some analyses of Japanese and especially of Philippine languages (cf. Kusanagi [forthcoming] and McKaughan [1970]). This term is used here in the normal communicative sense of focus of attention.

[4]Martin mentions one more mood in the same place:

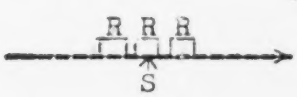
> The tentative mood [sometimes called 'suggestive' or 'future' or 'probable future' or 'presumptive'] is used when an action isn't quite definite.

However, since this topic is outside the interest of this paper, it will not be discussed further.

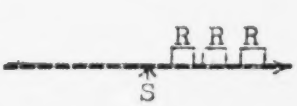
[5]In addition, an event can occur repeatedly, which can be illustrated as follows:

a.

tegamio kaita

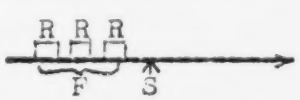
b. 

tegamio kaku

c. 

tegamio kaku

[6]In addition to the situation described in the above illustrations, repeated actions occur:

a. 

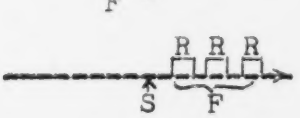
hoũga yoku aqta 'There often was a book.'

b.

(same as above)

c.

hoũga aru

d. 

(same as above)

[7]Note that the tense system in English concerns itself with the relative ordering of the real time of an event and the speaking time; i.e., whether the real time of the event precedes, coincides with, or follows the speaking time.

[8]One native speaker's comment on the sentences in (26) was that the normal situational relationship between the actions indicated by the verbs yomu 'to

read' and kau 'to buy' (most stores won't let you read a book before you buy it) can account for the predictable preference of the native for the interpretation which indicates that the buying precedes the reading. That this is not a Japanese syntactic peculiarity can be seen by the English native speaker's choice of the identical translation as more 'logical' even in English. When other pair of verbs are involved, the preferred sequence of the actions may be different.

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